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Raid by Israel May Fuel A-Arms Race

Israel's strike against the Iraqi nuclear works was intended to delay Iraq's acquisition of nuclear weapons. But American intelligence analysts fear it may have the reverse effect.

According to sources at the highest level, President Reagan's intelligence advisers have warned that the Israeli raid may actually have accelerated the nuclear arms race in the Middle East. Their preliminary conclusions were presented at secret Pentagon meetings late on the day of the attack and early the next morning.

Here's how the experts' reasoning goes:

- Iraq now has large quantities of weapons-grade nuclear fuel and no peaceful use for it. If the nuclear facility at Osirak was being built strictly for peaceful purposes as the Iraqis claim, the plant's destruction leaves Iraq without a non-military place to utilize its uranium. The Pentagon estimates that Iraq has enough nuclear raw material for as many as four bombs — and could have one ready for testing within six months.

- Iraq has signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and has permitted inspections of its nuclear facilities. But now, as a point of national honor, Iraq may pull out of the treaty and thus be able to carry on weapons development in secrecy.

- Saudi Arabia, apprehensive about the radical Iraqis, helped finance Pakistan's nuclear program last year in

exchange for guarantees that the technology would not be shared with Iraq. But since the Israeli raid apparently violated Saudi airspace, the Saudis are under considerable Arab pressure to let Pakistan pass on its nuclear knowhow to Iraq. The Saudis may even feel a need now for their own nuclear weapons as a deterrent against both Israel and Iraq.

- France, with parliamentary elections coming up soon, may decide to ship the rest of the nuclear fuel Iraq ordered for the Osirak plant, depending on how President Mitterand interprets the impact of the Israeli raid on the French electorate.

- Any presumed delay in the use of the Osirak facility for training purposes is illusory. The Iraqis can get training for their technicians in France, Brazil, Italy or the Soviet Union.

- If the Israeli raid has in fact goaded Iraq into weapons development, its Soviet-built reactor — which was not hit — could be used to assemble Iraqi bombs. A pre-emptive strike against this facility, in view of the Soviet involvement, would be foolhardy.

These intelligence assessments, confided to my associate Ron McRae by top-level sources, were not snap judgments. Our intelligence agencies have had eight months to weigh the possible effects of an Israeli strike against the Iraqi nuclear facility.

As I reported last Sept. 30, the Defense Intelligence Agency had warned President Carter that the Israelis were undoubtedly planning to "take out" the Iraqi nuclear plant. In fact, an unsuccessful air strike against Osirak occurred on the very day my column appeared. But because this was in the first days of the Iraqi-Iranian war, it was widely supposed that the raid was an Iranian venture. The plane involved was an F4 Phantom, a jet the United States has supplied to both Iran and Israel.

Israel, of course, did not claim credit for the failed attack, but some intelligence people suspected it was an Israeli action.

In view of the alleged surprise the Israeli raid caused in Washington, it is instructive to quote the intelligence estimate of eight months ago. "Prudently, we must assume that Israel is considering some sort of action to forestall Iraqi acquisition of a nuclear capability, and we must consider the implications of such actions," the Defense Intelligence Agency advised the White House.

With almost eerie prescience, the intelligence experts warned, "The most pressing problem for the United States is not the prospect of a nuclear conflict involving Israel and Iraq . . . but rather the prospect of a pre-emptive Israeli strike, with conventional weapons, against the [Iraqi] reactor."